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Child, Danielle ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7426-3338>  
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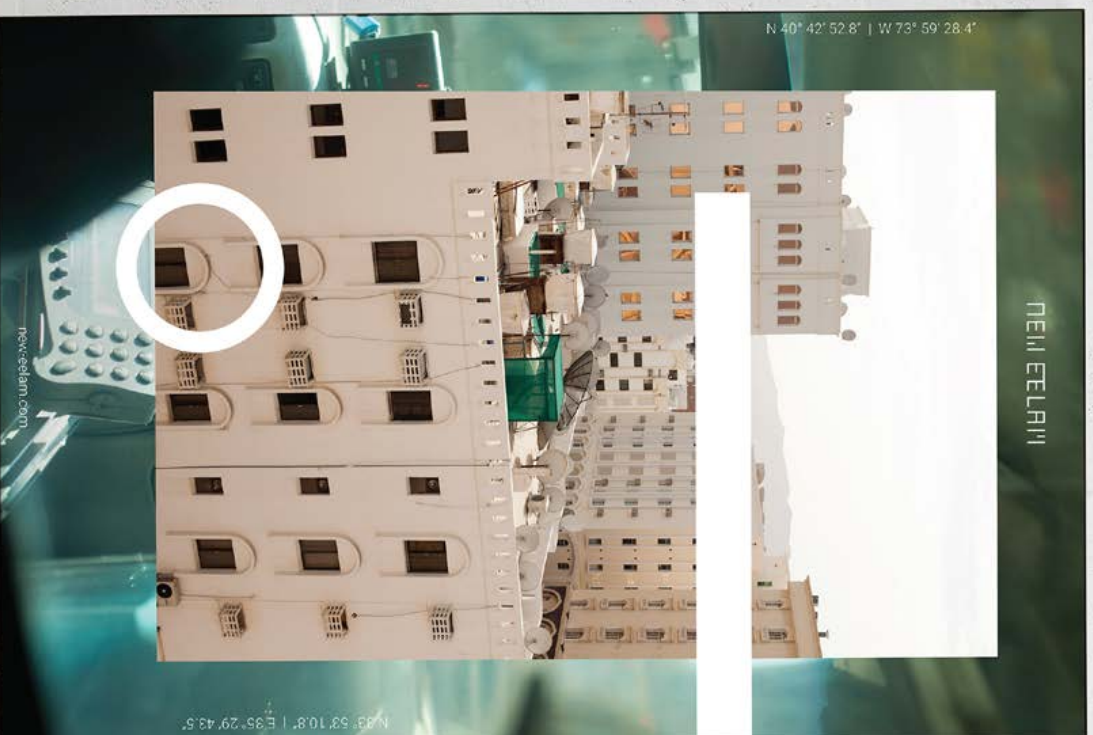
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Christopher Kulendran Thomas in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann, *NE LB 13*, 2019. Courtesy Max McClure

## Artistic Economies: Shelter, Food and Clothing

– Danielle Child

On viewing Christopher Kulendran Thomas' film *60 Million Americans Can't Be Wrong* (2016), one could easily mistake the work for another prompt critical take on the contemporary obsession with the virtual; one in which people's lives are experienced through smart technologies and social media.<sup>1</sup> However, this film is not a tongue-in-cheek spoof but rather a real-world proposal for a 'democratised off-shore economic system' that allows people to become or remain transitory citizens – 'citizens of the cloud for whom the whole world could be home.'<sup>2</sup> The film is part of a project by Kulendran Thomas and Annika Kuhlmann titled *New Eelam* (2016–ongoing), a start-up company billed as a 'subscription housing' service. The project ambitiously proposes to cross legal and nation-state boundaries in offering a fluid form of citizenship in which what we call 'home' could be anywhere. It plans to reorganise housing to 'function more like informational goods'.<sup>3</sup>

A work like *New Eelam* begs the question, what makes artists suitable figures to propose new or alternative economic models? In recent years a number of artists have engaged in proposing and also effectively employing alternative economies. What is meant here by alternative economies are practices that, by extending artistic strategies into the wider economic sphere, articulate non-standard models of economy as well as of artistry. Operating beyond the institutional space of the gallery, the goods and services produced here go beyond the artistic. Of course, such strategies have

**Danielle Child examines the extent to which artists' proposals for alternative contemporary economies successfully revive the historical avant-garde project of returning art to the praxis of life.**

themselves been subsumed within dominant models to an extent. It is perhaps worth reiterating the now-well-rehearsed story of the co-optation of the artist as model worker in the contemporary period. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, originally published in 1999, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello observe the way in which management discourse from the 1990s began to absorb the 'artist critique' of capitalism.<sup>4</sup> As a result, a Romantic model of the artist became a validated model of productive worker. Traits such as creativity, thinking 'outside of the box' and flexibility became desirable qualities for the new worker. However, as Maurizio Lazzarato has argued, this conception of the artist was already out-of-date by the time of its capitalist co-option post-1968.<sup>5</sup> It is a conception based on the problematic nineteenth-century bourgeois conception of the bohemian artist as freed of capitalist production. The stereotype that results from this is still commonly found in creative industry discourse; moreover, it is well understood that the idea of the artist as un-alienated worker makes the role particularly conducive to the neoliberal work environment.

The neoliberal ideology has been crucial to fostering values of individualism and selfhood and, in the UK, the birth of the 'Creative Industries', cementing the inclusion of 'creative' values within dominant economic models. New working models associated with immaterial, flexible and service-based work thus become aligned with a certain assumption of what an artist is or does. When labour begins to adapt to skills aligned with a certain conception of the artist, it is unsurprising that the artist becomes comfortable in crossing the line between art and the economic to propose their own economies.<sup>6</sup>

In the documentary *60 Million Americans...*, *New Eelam* is framed as a project for the displaced. Its title is based on a lost Tamil state in Sri Lanka – Eelam – that following the neo-Marxist revolution was governed for three decades (until 2009) as an autonomous state, and was also the home of Kulendran Thomas' family. The film tells of how, after the state fell, the people of Eelam travelled to the West to look for a better life. This forms the inspiration for *New Eelam*'s proposal of a model of housing for the displaced and transient, categories that today resurface in the form of the flexible worker. From this proposition, it appears that Kulendran Thomas and Kuhlmann might be developing a housing model for the precariat.

In his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Guy Standing observes that the precariat do not yet constitute a social class. It is not, he argues, a homogeneous group but rather one that ranges from cleaners, care workers, refugees and migrants to creative workers.<sup>8</sup> Although the practical application of *New Eelam's* economic model is not yet fully realised, the viewer is told that there would be a flat rate subscription to the proposed housing cloud 'at a level equivalent to the cost of rent, reduced over time to a trivial rate'.<sup>9</sup> From the outset, then, *New Eelam* is presumably initially available only to the employed, or to those who can afford rent in cities across the globe. Although the film and title suggest that the self-governed housing model is for the politically displaced, such as those who left Eelam to look for a better life, the literature that accompanies the project at Bristol's Spike Island pitches the housing model to people who 'work freelance or change their job frequently'.<sup>10</sup> This proposition seems to appeal to one group within Standing's understanding of the precariat – the creative, flexible worker – while potentially excluding those whose mobility or transience is more a result of, say, immigration status than career path.<sup>11</sup>



Christopher Kolendran, Thomas in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann, *New Eelam*, 2017. Installation view, *New Eelam: Tensta Tenstar, Tensta boethall*, Stockholm. Photograph: Jean-Baptiste Beanger. Courtesy the artist

Other contemporary artistic economic practices return to questions of material production, thinking in particular about co-operative production. Company Drinks (2015–ongoing), based in East London is an example of one such project, which, in stark contrast to the 'real estate technology company' of *New Eelam*,<sup>12</sup> returns to material production in the field of soft drinks. Company Drinks is a Community Interest Company (CIC) that began as an art project titled *Company: Movements, Deals, and Drinks* in 2014 (subsequently registered as a Company Drinks CIC in June 2015), initiated by the artist Kathrin Böhm in Dagenham and Barking, East London. Böhm's practice, as part of the Myvillages collective, puts forward a new understanding of the rural as a site of cultural production. Company Drinks builds on Böhm's interest in the rural through exploring its relationship to urban working-class history. Like *New Eelam*, it revisits for its inspiration a lost historical practice associated with a specific place: that of hop picking in Kent. In the early twentieth century, locals from the East End of London would travel to the nearby countryside in Kent to undertake the seasonal labour of hop picking. It was largely women and children (those not in permanent employment) who made the journey, escaping the congestion of the city. This practice ended in the 1950s, but has been revived as part of Company Drinks' production



process, in addition to foraging for botanicals in local urban parks. For some this is a nostalgic return to a lost time in which leisure and labour were demarcated for workers who stayed on the farms for around four to six weeks per year.<sup>13</sup> But while looking to the past, the project also makes visible the new workers who undertake the labour of fruit picking for commercial farmers in Kent today. In the Company Drinks and Myvillages film *Foreign Pickers* (2016), we meet a small group of Eastern European workers who come to Kent to work on the farms during the picking season. By making these contemporary workers visible, the project exposes some of the economic conditions of global labour. Although the location of origin of the workers has changed, the idea of a temporary relocation of people to undertake low-cost seasonal work has not.

Böhm stresses that Company Drinks is 'run in a way that is clearly not a neoliberal model'.<sup>14</sup> It is important that the company offers an alternative economy to that posed by contemporary capitalism. Its production process is based around the company's five 'Cs – culture, collective, community, collaborating, commerce'.<sup>15</sup> It started from the idea of returning to a historic community practice and, as Böhm explains: 'It is trying to merge a cultural idea with an economic concept'.<sup>16</sup> Rather than prioritising the economic in this relationship, the company reverses a typical commodification of the 'local' or 'artisan' under neoliberalism by employing a practice in which the 'commercial supports the communal and cultural'.<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps where art has a role to play in a project that is also a functioning business.

Böhm insists that what she terms the 'privilege' of the art world should be 'shared and interconnected with other efforts'.<sup>18</sup> She uses art as a way to think about economic practices that take place outside of the art institution (including the art market), developing a practice that attempts to avoid neoliberal economic methods. Her position and skills as an artist help her facilitate a project that might otherwise be 'just another company'. She maintains that the company is part of her art practice, while simultaneously being viewed as a place for employment.

Böhm is not alone in initiating a community project that resulted in the establishment of a CIC. In 2014, artist Jeane Van Hoeswijk worked with the local community in Anfield, Liverpool on *Homebaked* (2010–ongoing) initiated as part of the Liverpool Biennial. Like Böhm the artist did not approach the community with an idea for a business model, but began to talk to those interested in working with her in meetings held in an empty, closed-down bakery. The idea of resurrecting the bakery – once part of the community – came from the participants. Today *Homebaked* is run as a cooperative business in Anfield selling pies to football supporters on match days, and bread to the locals. As with Company Drinks, the artist made use of distance to allow for the projects to develop from the work of participants rather than top-down. This artistic distance (beyond economic thinking) allows for the development of long-term collaborative projects, such as the Centre for Plausible Economics (which Böhm works on alongside curator Kuba Szreder and economist Katherine Gibson) that focus on the representation of local economic practices within communities. Böhm does not avoid politics in her practice.







established a new 'Limited Liability' Company (which is referred to as a 'blind non-aligned

oral corporation'<sup>29</sup>) called Yugoexport, registered in the US.<sup>30</sup> In SER Hatiduk presents a 'transcendental area' in which visitors are able to purchase items. But this is a shop with a difference. On entering, visitors are shown neither the items nor a price list. In order to see the items, they have to ask an employee; Hatiduk has described this as a way of slowing down the transaction – the visitor has to talk first.<sup>31</sup> The visitor is then asked to define their income level for the price (of the Borosana shoe or another item, such as a functional dress designed in the Mussolini era) to be revealed. Items can also be purchased from the Yugoexport website.<sup>32</sup> This is a fully functioning company – Hatiduk draws a salary from Yugoexport, and has stated that the corporation's profits finance the salaries of its workforce as well as the development and production of current and future artworks.<sup>33</sup>

The task of the historical avant-garde was to return art to the praxis of life. In the examples discussed here, artists have initiated new economic practices, each returning in some way to history for their models – be they the historical state of Eielum, previous practices of hop picking or an ergonomic shoe designed under communist rule – as if to alert us to the fact that contemporary economic practices have in various ways failed. These are also political practices that in different ways refer to the displaced. *New Eielum* appeals to the voluntarily displaced creative worker while imagining a future in which home could be provided for the those displaced due to political circumstances. Company Drinks offers an economic model for a deprived and overlooked area in which Böhm has identified possibilities. And *Nine Hour Delay* keeps alive a factory and form of production that once belonged to a now-lost country.

Of these contemporary working practices, *New Eielum* is the most aligned with the artistic, offering immaterial services through a model that embraces the criticised technical determinism of Marx and Engels.<sup>34</sup> The course of history has demonstrated – as Rainero Panzeri warned us via Marx – that capitalist technologies are not neutral.<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to distinguish between the new 'platform capitalism' and the alternative model of housing that Kuleindran, Thomas and Kuhlmann describe. The financial details of *New Eielum* are still unclear, particularly in terms of the cost of the service.<sup>36</sup> Company Drinks works on an alternative pricing structure: the drinks produced are priced in accordance with the local demographic; in the area in which the bottled drinks are produced, they are sold for £1 and in West London they are priced at £3. This practice is echoed in Hatiduk's *Yugoexport*, where each product – be it a rubbing of a contract from a marble engraving, the Borosana shoe or a functional dress – is priced according to the buyer's income.

Clockwise from top left:

Company Drinks Bar, Ffitee Art Fair, London, 2018. Photograph: Jennifer Balcombe

Kathrin Böhm explaining the diverse economies of Company Drinks at 'Centre for Plausible Economies' Study Day, Company Drinks, Park King, 2018. Photograph: Kevin Haeghele. Courtesy the artist

Sue Giovanni, still from *Foreign Pickers*, 2018. Film, 22min 05sec. Commissioned by Delta Foundation

Sue Giovanni, still from *Foreign Pickers*, 2018. Film, 22min 05sec. Commissioned by Delta Foundation

This 'economic' or 'business' turn in recent artistic practice could mistakenly be understood as an effect of the neoliberal 'new spirit of capitalism'. Mistakenly, because the practices discussed here explore (with varying efficacy) the possibility of micro-economies that attempt to escape the economy of contemporary capitalism. This takes form in post-capitalist, cooperative or historical production models (but with revised pricing based on income rather than production of value). Some artists might now be more comfortable crossing the line between art and production. Yet these companies aren't simply the result of out-of-date notions of artists exercising creativity in the service of neoliberalism. The emergence of these kinds of artistic economies could be understood as critical responses to the capitalist co-optation of 'unalienated' artistic labour. That is, a response to the return of art to life praxis when the work/life boundary seems less and less visible.

1 I am reminded of Hito Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), which unravels the often hidden relationship between warfare and digital technologies.

2 Anika Kuhlmann, 2016, available at <https://dis-art.net/series/60-million-americans-can-t-be-wrong/> (last accessed on 5 December 2019).

3 *Ibid.* On a related project see also Renate van der Zee, 'Fairbnb.coop launches, offering help for social projects', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2019/nov/13/fairbnb-coop-holiday-rental-website-launches-help-social-projects> (last accessed on 29 January 2020).

4 See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2005.

5 2007, available at <http://dipne.vtransversal.it/2007/azazazazaz/> (last accessed on 20 January 2020).

6 See my discussion of Lazearato's critique in relation to a possible contemporary misconception of artist in Daniela Chila, *Working Aesthetics: Labour, Art and Capitalism*, London: Bloomsbury/Radical Aesthetics Radical Art, 2019, p. 77.

7 There are, of course, prior examples of art crossing into the realm of production, such as early twentieth-century Russian Productivism and the Artists Placement Group in 1960s London.

8 On painting, see for example: *The New Aesthetics*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 5.

9 On design, see for example: *The New Aesthetics*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 5.

10 *Ibid.* See also 60 Million Americans Can't Be Wrong, op. cit.

11 It is perhaps telling that the project was initiated by a conversation between Kuleindran Thomas and Kuhlmann about 'ways to streamline how they had both been living'. Louise Kuleindran, 'Prototyping the Future: An Interview with Christopher Kuleindran Thomas', *Berlin Art Link*, 27 September 2017, available at <http://www.berlinartlink.com/2016/09/27/work-prototyping-the-future-an-interview-with-christopher-kuleindran-thomas/> (last accessed 14 September 2019).

12 C. K. Thomas, *New Eielum*, Bristol: Bristol, op. cit.

13 In the short film *Company Drinks*, one participant recalls how, as a child, she would see her cousins at this annual event. The film *Foreign Pickers* further confirms this nostalgia when those who used to go hop picking as children return to the site of work. See *Company Drinks*, 2019 <https://vimeo.com/video/326901966> (last accessed on 4 December 2019) and *Foreign Pickers*, dir. Company Drinks and Myriam Vlieghe, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/181628977> (last accessed on 4 December 2019).

14 Kathrin Böhm interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter, *Arteconomies*, *Art Monthly*, no. 429, September 2019, p. 3.

15 *Company Drinks*, op. cit.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

17 Böhm, p. 2.

18 Böhm interviewed by E. M. De Wachter, *Arteconomies*, op. cit., p. 3.

19 The Böhm interview is by E. M. De Wachter, *Arteconomies*, op. cit., p. 3.

20 Hatiduk uses the Balkan phrase 'hope is the greatest whore' in her work to refer to the idea that by eradicating hope, you eradicate the cruelty of waiting. Nada Erdeljesic and Ana Alcoriza, 'Hope is the Greatest Whore', hope, critique, and management studies in Irena Hatiduk's artwork, *M@n@gement*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2018, pp. 435–53.

21 Irena Hatiduk cited in Borosana Shoe Issue with Irena Hatiduk, documents 14 website available at <https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/15826/borosana-shoe-issue> (last accessed on 20 January 2020).

22 See Monika Szewczyk, 'Realismically Speaking', Irena Hatiduk, *Mousse*, vol. 50, p. 243, available at [https://realism.society.org/media/files/nm50\\_hatiduk\\_doppie.pdf](https://realism.society.org/media/files/nm50_hatiduk_doppie.pdf) (last accessed on 4 December 2019).

23 Expanding on blindness, Hatiduk notes that oral history is changeable and can be misused. See I. Hatiduk, *Against Biography, Seductive Exacting Realism* (ed. Hatiduk and Solweig Øyefjord), Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017, n.p.

24 The name is a play on a Yugoslavian clothing company that went bankrupt in 2003. See M. Szewczyk and Yugoexport / I. Hatiduk, 'Political Futures', talk at Kunsthal Wm, 2 February 2016, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkIMtV65YV0> (last accessed on 4 December 2019).

25 The Yugoexport website also asks the customer to define their income – mid, lower or upper – before prices are revealed.

26 See M. Szewczyk and Yugoexport / I. Hatiduk, 'Political Futures', op. cit.

27 See M. Szewczyk and Yugoexport / I. Hatiduk, 'Political Futures', op. cit.

28 Marx and Engels have been criticised for the belief emphasised that the placed in their analyses of industrial capitalism on the role of technology in automating capitalist production and, subsequently, society in their analyses of industrial capitalism.

29 See Rainero Panzeri, *The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx versus the Objectivists*, 1964, available at <http://ibcom.org/library/capitalist-use-machinery-rainero-panzeri> (last accessed on 20 January 2020).

30 See Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge and Malden, UK: Polity Press, 2016.